



CT FEDERATION OF CATHOLIC SCHOOL PARENTS

Mary C. Roberts
Director

Testimony of Tracy Heim
CT Federation of Catholic School Parents
Committee on Finance, Revenue and Bonding
March 13, 2014

Senate Bill 29. *"An Act Authorizing and Adjusting Bonds of the State for Capital Improvements, Transportation and other Purposes."*

Good Morning, Senator Fonfara, Representative Widlitz and other distinguished members of the Committee on Finance, Revenue and Bonding, my name is Tracy Heim and I am a member of the CT Federation of Catholic School Parents, I am here on behalf of both myself, a parent of three students at St. Rose of Lima School in Newtown, and our Principal, Mary R. Maloney. I appreciate this opportunity to offer my comments in support of amending Section 9 of Bill 29, *An Act Authorizing and Adjusting Bonds of the State for Capital Improvements, Transportation and other Purposes*.

We applaud Governor Malloy and the General Assembly for their hard work in 2013 on the School Security Grant Program in Section 84 of Public Act 13-3. Going forward, we are respectfully requesting on behalf of the Catholic schools, that the law be amended to allow our schools to also access grants for school safety and upgraded security measures.

On December 14, 2012, the St. Rose of Lima School community was directly impacted as a result of the shooting event that occurred at Sandy Hook School.

Students in Grades Kindergarten through 8th grade were attending 9am Mass in the Church. The school secretary received a message from her child's school that they were in lockdown due to a random shooting in the town of Sandy Hook. She had a teacher relay the message to the principal who called for a lockdown in the Church and informed the Pre-School to initiate a lockdown as well. Parents and parishioners were also in attendance at the Mass that morning. Through the advice of local police, teachers moved the children from the Church back into the main school building, a more secure location, to continue a secure lockdown. The lockdown was changed to a soft lockdown around noon. 175 students in the upper grades were not permitted to go to the portable classrooms and, therefore, remained in a soft lockdown in the large multi-purpose room of our school and some main school classrooms. The Pre-School morning session was dismissed after normal hours and the afternoon session was told not to report. I was one of three parents present in the building that day; we assisted where and when we could.

A telephone call indicating that St. Rose of Lima School "would be next" resulted in a second lockdown. Police were contacted by the parish secretary and they arrived on campus to investigate the source of the call. When advised by police, the lockdown was changed to a soft lockdown at around 2pm and students began to prepare for dismissal. Parents were allowed at that time to come to the main school entrance building to begin picking-up their children.

While preparing students to go home, Newtown police received a message that there was a problem in the St. Rose of Lima School Kindergarten classroom. Police stormed the building, with weapons drawn. Middle school students were in the hallways and walking between the portable classrooms and as the police entered the main school

building to find the Kindergarten classroom. The school went into the third lockdown of the day. Once all cleared (after 3pm), the Newtown police worked with the bus company to have a special dismissal time and procedure for the students.

On Monday, December 17, a meeting was called for all teachers, staff and administrators to meet with counselors from Catholic Charities and local Catholic high schools. Teachers were fearful to enter the building. Very emotional, large and small group sessions were conducted all day. Teachers were invited to attend a Newtown session with teachers and administration from the public schools at noon and made the drive to Newtown High School only to learn that the program changed and that planned sessions had concluded. Teachers returned to our school to continue additional discussions independent of the other schools staff and administrators. It was determined that an event was needed to allow the teachers and students to get together prior to Christmas. The Newtown Youth Academy offered a playroom for a couple of hours for students to gather together and play. In addition, lunch and counseling took place with teachers, parents and students. Students even broke out into spontaneous Christmas carols.

Due to the high publicity, press and the nine funerals taking place at the Church, it was decided that the school was to be closed the week of December 17th through the 21st and did not reopen until January 2, 2013.

When the school buildings re-opened, teachers and students received minimal counseling services through the town. Student and teacher emotions have escalated due to unknown triggers and flashbacks. Teachers were provided opportunities at meetings to express their concerns about feeling safe as well as caring for students. Parents were and continue to be very emotional about the safety measures and lack of similar security as the public schools. They are seeking a great deal of counseling assistance as well. Due to funds not being available to the school, only a minimal amount of counseling was provided immediately following the incident. The school has experienced intermittent surfacing of post-traumatic stress symptoms in students, teachers and parents.

Our Principal, Mary Maloney, has been engaged in the Newtown Security Committee meetings, Newtown Prevention Council meetings and with Jo Ann Freiberg, an Educational Consultant with the Connecticut State Department of Education to gather information and recommendations with regard to hardening the facilities and creating safety plans.

Due to budget constraints, Newtown will not include St. Rose of Lima School within its provision of an officer onsite for each of the public schools in our town. A significant portion of our school community finds the presence of the police on campus to be comforting and we are looking into our options pertaining to this service. In addition, Newtown will also not provide provisions for a Security Guard at the non-public schools located in the district. First Selectwoman, Pat Llodra proposed a one time grant of \$50,000 to all non-profit elementary schools in Newtown. The proposal was approved and the non-public schools received \$50,000 to use for security purposes.

St. Rose School Connection to Victims

Five of the children killed had attended St. Rose of Lima Pre-School. The teachers currently working at the Pre-School had these children in their classes. One of the children killed, Olivia Rose Engel, was an older sibling of a current Pre-School student. One of the adult victims, Anne Marie Murphy, is a sister to a Pre-School staff person and my daughters teacher at the time. One of the adult victims, Vickie Soto, was a dear friend of one of the elementary school teachers. Three of the victims were children that older students at our school were hired as child sitters for. Many students in Grades 1 through 4 were friends or played sports with the Sandy Hook School children who lost their lives. Teachers and administrators had professional relationships with School Psychologist, Mary Sherlock. Our buildings are also shared with the parish community. More than 1,200 Newtown public school students are educated in our school buildings Sunday through Wednesday.

Current Situation

St. Rose of Lima School is currently benefiting from a SERV grant that was submitted by The Town of Newtown in the spring of 2013. The grant enables the school to provide a full time school counselor for our students in Grades Kindergarten through grade 8 for the period August 2013- August 2014. It is hopeful that renewal of services will take place through the SERV grant for the school year 2014-2015. In addition, our school is currently benefiting

from a possible grant from the Department of Justice, Victims of Crimes as a result of the Town of Newtown agreeing to allow our school to be included in the grant. The decision was made due to the fact that all children in Newtown needed to be provided the same security protection and post-traumatic professional services.

Proposed Senate Bill 29

It is without a doubt that the grant funding and town allocations have been a tremendous asset to the social-emotional and building safety needs of our school. Knowing the important impact that these grant funds have on our school, the efforts to improve communication with Town of Newtown officials, and the collaborative efforts of the public and non-public schools has had in Newtown, I applaud and appreciate that Bill 29 is being proposed.

I respectfully request that:

-The Senate Bill 29 be amended to allow non-public and Catholic schools be allowed to access the grant sent forth in Section 9.

-Prior to approving the proposed Bill 29, the inclusion of language that ensures an equitable grant application process for all schools, public and non-public, and that the percentage of funding for a town be reflective of a student-based percentage that reflect equitable funding for security and professional services of all schools, public and non-public.

-In addition, provisions in Bill 29 should reflect the importance of including non-public schools in emergency exercises, developing municipal emergency plans, identifying and implementing district-wide security measures and needs assessments.

Such language in Bill 29 will ensure that all school administrators, whether public or private, are provided the ability to offer a safe school environment and are accountable to ensure the safety and well-being of the students who attend their school.

Respectfully, we ask that you amend Section 9 of Senate Bill 29 to allow Catholic and Private schools access to the school security grant funds available to the state's public school systems.

Thank you very much for your consideration.

Respectfully submitted,
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